Oxford Hills and Sprawl
January 7, 2003
Harper Conference Center, Ripley Medical Building
Norway, Maine
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Good morning. I want to thank you for inviting me to meet with you to discuss the cost of sprawl and how it is affecting Oxford Hills.

Let's begin by discussing what sprawl is and why the State is concerned about it.

Over the last 30 years, the fastest growing towns in the State have been the "new suburbs," 10 to 20 miles distant from metropolitan areas.

These high growth communities have accounted for virtually all of Maine's population growth, with no signs of abating.

(MAP) Let's look at how Maine's traditional pattern of New England town and countryside has changed from 1940 to the present.

(1940) In 1940, Maine's urban and suburban population was centralized in a limited number of discrete centers indicated in red surrounded by rural areas shown in gray.

(1960) As we move to 1960, larger blocks of emerging suburbs, the yellow areas, begin to appear.

(1970, 1980, 1990) The trend continues in 1970 and 1980, until by 1990 sizable blocks of suburban and urban development are apparent – nearly continuous along the southern coastline of the State and distinct along its major highway corridors.

Over these 20 years, there was as much land developed as had been developed in the entire history of the State, consuming land four times faster than population growth.

(2000, 2010) If we assume a constant rate of development based on actual occurrence between 1990 and 1996, by 2010, land consumption by development will double again.

(2020, 2050) By 2020, sprawl will blanket most of the southern part of the State and by 2050, it will consume Bangor and Penobscot Bay.

(1940-2050) Now, let's see that again.

We know sprawl when we see it, but sometimes it's hard to define because it means different things to different people –

(Figure 2) For some, it is commercial big boxes, strip development, and endless miles of pavement and signs;

(Figure 3) For others, it is cul-de-sac after cul-de-sac;

(Figure 4) While for still others, it is rural road frontages gobbled up by single family homes;

(Figure 5) re-colonization of abandoned farm fields; or

(Figure 6) isolated homesteads and

(Figure 7) McMansions.

However, sprawl is actually a familiar word, taken from everyday language.

Webster defines it as "spreading out in an awkward or uneven way, especially so as to take up more space than is necessary.

However, sprawl is not synonymous with growth.

As a pattern of development, sprawl is a leapfrogging of development beyond the reach of existing municipal services, consuming large amounts of land and prematurely converting rural lands to suburban or urban use in the process.

(Figure 8) Sprawl costs the State budget perhaps $50 to $75 million per year in what ought to be controllable expenses (for schools, school buses, and roads among other things) and local budgets millions more to pay for new and redundant infrastructure and lengthened service routes for police, fire, emergency, road maintenance, and plowing in remote areas.

(Figure 9) Sprawl hurts the environment. It is the leading cause of Maine's ozone days, threatens more than 2,000 lakes in the State, and destroys habitat for wildlife.

(Figure 10) It eats away open space and productive rural lands.

(Figure 11) It forces restrictions on traditional rural uses, including farmers, loggers, and gravel miners, many of whom were working the land before the suburban development arrived.

Sprawl also saps traditional regional centers. These communities face the multiple threat of a fleeing middle class population, high tax rates, under-used infrastructure they must maintain, and the isolation of dependent populations, like the elderly and disabled.

For example (Figure 12 and 13), while the State as a whole has seen school enrollments decline by 27,000 students, but this summary statistic masks the shifting of school population from traditional centers like Lewiston, Auburn, Bethel, and Bridgton to the surrounding fast growing communities like Turner, Newry, and Naples, causing the need for increasing school construction expenses everywhere.

The cost of sprawl can also be measured in the increasing amount of time we spend commuting to work (Figure 14) and having to drive to acquire even the basic necessities of everyday life, in the resulting environmental degradation of our air and water and (Figure 15) in the loss of wildlife as we subdivide large blocks of undeveloped land into smaller and smaller 1 to 20 acre parcels

In a word, sprawl is wasteful.

But it is also powerful.

It gives ordinary people the chance to live in privacy and close to nature with plenty of elbowroom.

It gives rural landowners a chance to sell to developers and cash-in on their hard-earned equity.

It allows us to escape noise and landlords.

It is part of the American dream.

Yet looking around at the beautiful landscape of the Oxford Hills region, you might very well say to me, "Sprawl is just something that's happening in southern and coastal Maine. You're just acting like Chicken Little, Beth. Sprawl isn't happening here."

Well, fasten your seat belts, folks.

In preparation for this talk, I took a look at some of the most recent figures for the Oxford Hills region, and guess what? Sprawl is beginning to show its tell-tale statistical signs that will soon enough be evident across the Oxford Hills landscape.

One of the reasons it's so hard to combat sprawl is that it happens lot by lot, house by house, strip by strip, relatively slowly and incrementally, picking up speed fairly until suddenly you notice that wide undeveloped rural road frontages start disappearing, roadways get congested, you have trouble sustaining a volunteer fire company because everyone is out of town during daytime hours, and where large parcels of forest and farmland large parcels of land that define the very nature of the community are on the market and gone.

It's particularly insidious when the economy of an area is in transition; where traditional industries are in decline and where children of working class folks can't find a job or, if they are lucky enough to find one at the edge of a previously inconceivable commuting distance, can no longer afford to buy a home in town.

Oxford Hills is at a crossroads. Statistics suggest that the region has moved from a historical centralization population in its more urban communities of Norway, Paris, and Oxford to a more decentralized pattern of suburbanization, all while it loses jobs from its traditional industries.

(Figure 16) Some parts of the State, like Aroostook, Piscatquis, Somerset, and Washington Counties, are clearly experiencing a massive out-migration of its population.

(Figure 17) Other parts, like York, Cumberland, Sagadahoc, Knox, Waldo, and Hancock County, are experiencing a significant influx of residents from away.

(Figure 18) Oxford Hills is experiencing both phenomena. And all are seeing the same seepage of population from their traditional core communities to a ring of suburbanizing communities that were formerly rural.

(Figure 19) A review of population change in the region suggests that all of the towns in the region grew in the 1970's, 80's, and 90's; but not at an even rate. True to form, Norway has been losing population and Oxford's rate of growth is noticeably slower than that of surrounding towns. While Paris appears to be holding its own, this graph is somewhat deceiving.

(Figure 20) Let's look at another graphic that illustrates the region's growth rate since the 1960's. Population growth in all three of the region's traditional centers is dwarfed by the rapid rate of expansion what is occurring in all of the surrounding communities.

(Figure 21) Housing growth reflects similar trends.

(Figure 22) And school enrollments reflect the familiar symptoms of sprawl. Oxford being the exception as it hosts the region's high school.

(Figure 23) Since 1975, State expenditures on school construction appear to reflect the fact that, thus far, major school facility investments have tended to remain highest in traditional centers.

(Figure 24) But changing development patterns are beginning to catch up with you. Note that though tax assessments are generally lower in the suburbanizing communities, the rate of growth of local assessments is far higher in those communities as the demand for new facilities and expanded services rises commensurate with their swelling populations.

(Figure 25) At the very same time, the length of time spent traveling to and from work is increasing. In 1990, the average length of a resident of a service center in the region being more than 10 minutes shorter each day than that of residents of surrounding communities. And though I don't yet have the figures for 2000, I suspect that the difference will be even more striking.

(Figure 26) And perhaps most telling is this graphic illustrating the net change in population and housing density in the communities of Oxford Hills. Virtually everywhere, even in Norway, Oxford, and Paris, the rate of land consumption has risen far more than has population growth.

(Figure 27) So, in fact sprawl is coming to beautiful Oxford Hills. In fact, the numbers suggest it is already here.

Recognizing that, what can you do to minimize its effects? To answer that, I'd like to very briefly describe the State's Smart Growth principles and strategies and then encourage you to take a few specific steps.

First, I want to make it clear that Smart Growth varies from place to place, but generally it is the recognition that development should strive to be economically sound, environmentally friendly, and contribute to community livability.

(Figure 28) It is based in four broad principles. The first is that Maine will not accept regional land use regulation that limits growth to one area or another. **The freedom to choose to live where one wishes** is too dear to almost all of us.

But there is a twin principle to this -- that we should be willing, individually, to bear the costs of our individual decisions. We should not be asking society to pay those costs. So a key component of the approach should be to turn to the market place where the costs can be properly allocated, and individual decisions can be made with more complete knowledge of those costs.

A third key component is the principle that **healthy organisms don't die**. If our villages, town centers, and cities are healthy, they will hold their own. Conversely, if our rural places with their resource-based enterprises are healthy, they will be more resistant to the germs that are trying to invade them.

And the fourth key principle is a recognition that **developers don't cause sprawl**. They simply seek the path of least resistance in building and selling their products. If resistance in the path that leads to the more traditional patterns of the New England town becomes less, and a market for traditional patterns can be shown to exist, they will be allies in the implementation of more responsible patterns of development.

The State is pursuing its Smart Growth initiative through five different strategies.

- (Figure 29) Getting the State's house in order and leading by example,
- (Figure 30) Working to strengthen rural enterprises,
- (Figure 31) Working to strengthen service center communities,
- (Figure 32) Helping to relieve the suburbs, and
- (Figure 33) Encouraging the building of Great American Neighborhoods.

(Figure 34) I'd like to spend just a few more minutes describing Great American Neighborhoods as an alternative to the football-sized house lots we have been consuming our landscape with and what it could mean for the Oxford Hills region.

(Figure 35) Great American Neighborhoods come in many shapes and sizes. I'm sure you know of some in Norway and Oxford and Paris.

(Figure 36) But they have several things in common.

(Figure 37) They are walkable from end to end.

(Figure 38) They include both formal and informal open space to provide quiet respite from the demands of the everyday world and opportunities for informal meetings and interaction among its residents.

(Figure 39) They have a civic core, whether it's a church, a post office, or just a monument in the center of a public square. This area gives the Neighborhood its identity. What people think of when they they are trying to describe the place.

(Figure 40) They are made up of gridded, interconnected streets with sidewalks, curbs, esplanades and shade trees.

(Figure 41) The buildings and proportions of the streetscape have a human scale – one people can relate to and feel comfortable in.

(Figure 42) And they have what we call a public-private continuum where there are clearly defined public, semi-public, and

(Figure 43) private areas where residents can retreat from public cares and view.

(Figure 44) Our market research documents that nearly 40% of Maine's homebuying public is looking for a neighborhood like the one it grew up in. We need only allow them to be built.

And several Oxford Hills communities have the infrastructure, the public sewer and water systems that are needed to support these wonderful, compact neighborhoods.

I encourage you to plan for them, to embrace them. For their beauty and desirability and for the other side of the coin that they can help sustain – (Figure 45).